

**A Virgin Shall Spin and Bear a Son:
Reconsidering the Significance of Mary's Work in the *Protevangelium Jacobi***

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In the tenth chapter of the *Protevangelium Jacobi* (hereafter, PJ), the high priest summons a barely adolescent Virgin Mary to the temple along with seven other virgins. Their task: to spin thread for a new temple veil. Mary receives the scarlet and true purple, takes them home, and while she is spinning them, an angel visits her and delivers a message similar to what she receives in Luke: "You have found favor with the Lord ... you will become pregnant by means of his word ... the child to be born will be called holy, son of the Most High ... you will call him Jesus, for he himself (αὐτὸς γὰρ σώσει) will save his people from their sins" (PJ 11:5-8).¹

That Mary's spinning does not exist to describe her daily routine is standard currency. But the motivation behind its inclusion is unclear. Two hypotheses are fairly common. The first is that the material is apologetic, countering Celsus's accusation that Mary was "a common woman, a poor spinner" (Origen, *Cels.* 1.28). PJ's portrait is different; Mary does spin, but in service to the temple.² The second is that it contributes to the author's portrait of her as a paragon of righteousness. This option has been promoted by Ronald Hock, who interprets PJ an *encomium* that was written to praise Mary as one worthy of reverence.

Without necessarily challenging either of these positions, in the time I have today I'd like to

¹ All translations of PJ are my own. The Greek text used is Ronald Hock, *The Infancy Gospels of James and Thomas* (SB; Santa Rosa: Polebridge, 1995).

² So van Stempvoort, "The Protevangelium Jacobi, the Sources of its Theme and Style and their Bearing on its Date," in *Studia Evangelica* 3 (TU 88; ed. F. L. Cross; Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1964), 410. Similarly Cothenet, "Le Protévangile De Jacques," *ANRW* 25.6, 4256-57.

propose another way of reading this episode that takes into account the literary matrix in which it would have been read. I shall proceed in three steps: first, I will make a few remarks on the significance of the episode in the broader narrative; second, I will suggest that Mary's spinning echoes the activities of the *Moirae*, the Greek goddesses of fate who determine the course of human and divine destiny by spinning the thread of life; and finally, I consider briefly what I see to be theological significance of this image in light of the rending of the veil at the crucifixion. My thesis is that in the context of this episode, the thread of the veil and the body of Jesus are one and the same, and that the veil's tearing, as a divine act, specifies Mary's role in the incarnation. That is, the correspondence between her thread and the child in her womb, understood as the God of whom she declares herself a servant, locates Mary within the divine plan, subordinate to the very thread that she spins.

In the current narrative sequence, Mary's spinning follows the assignment of Joseph as her guardian/husband and her departure from the temple (in PJ 9) where she lived for nine years. When Joseph brings her home, he charges God with her protection and then leaves to build houses, making this the first time in the narrative that Mary's purity, carefully guarded since her infancy, is vulnerable. Up to this point, she has been protected from any sort of contamination: her mother purifies herself before breastfeeding her (PJ 5:9-10); she lives in a makeshift sanctuary where she is entertained by the enigmatic "undefiled daughters of the Hebrews" (PJ 6:4-5); she is guided to the temple by these same daughters when she is three; and she lives there, at the summit of purity, until she is twelve (PJ 7:5). But nothing implies that the priests are aware of Joseph's leaving her alone, so when the high priest gathers the virgins to spin thread for the veil, he does not hesitate to call her as well (PJ 10:4). And in doing so her connection with the temple is sustained, perhaps even reestablished. Her being chosen

by lot to spin not one but two types of thread reinforces to the reader and to the priests that, even in her absence from the temple, Mary is still the pure Virgin of the Lord.

That she spins during the annunciation suggests that her work also has christological implications. As Nicolas Conostas observes: “The spinning of the purple thread ... is an activity coincident with the moment of incarnation.”³ In fact, the author makes a point to emphasize that this is what she is doing when she receives the news of her pregnancy. Initially she hears the angel’s voice when she is outside drawing water; she becomes frightened, goes into the house, puts down her pitcher, picks up her thread, and starts to spin (lit.: “to draw it out [ἐλκεῖν]”). Only at that point does the angel deliver the message. A connection is thereby established not only between Mary and the temple, but between Jesus and the temple, or more specifically, Jesus and the veil. Again I quote Conostas: “When Mary devotedly spins the wool for the veil of the temple, the labor of her hands serves as a symbol for the labor of her womb.”⁴

Mary brings her thread to the high priest when she is finished spinning it, and he blesses her in a way that should sound familiar: “The Lord God has magnified your name, and you will be blessed by all the generations of the earth” (PJ 12:2). This, of course, is an adaptation of Mary’s own words in the *Magnificat* (Luke 1:46-48), which celebrates the work that God will accomplish because of her. After this she goes to visit Elizabeth, who greets her with similar enthusiasm but in more specific terms: “Why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For behold, the baby inside me leapt and blessed you” (PJ 12:5). Mary brings to each individual something that makes

³ Conostas, *Proclus of Constantinople and the Cult of the Virgin in Late Antiquity*, 326.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 330.

her worthy of praise: to the high priest she brings thread, but to both she brings a child. The pairing of these blessings suggests that the high priest does not praise Mary for her thread alone, but also because of what it correlates with, namely, the body of Jesus.

The means by which Mary's work is described are faithful to accounts of the veil's creation in the LXX, as two of the verbs used, *νέω* and *κλώθω*, are employed in LXX Exodus with reference to the production of cloth used in the desert tabernacle, including the veil.⁵ These same verbs are used commonly in ancient literature with reference to the act of spinning, but they also refer frequently to the actions of the *Moirae*, goddesses of fate (*μοῖρα/αἵσα*) responsible for "spinning" the thread of life.⁶ The *Moirae* have no real "legend" in the strict sense; they develop gradually from a worldview that sees fate as a condition, an ordering of the world, rather than an entity.⁷

Homer is the first to speak of one's fate as something "spun" by the gods. Near the end of the *Iliad*, for example, Priam says to Achilles, "for so have the gods spun (*ἔπεκλώσαντο*) the thread for

⁵ Whenever the creation of the veil (*καταπέτασμα*) is narrated, they always occur in tandem (so Exod 26:31; 37:3). The third, *ἔλκειν*, is somewhat problematic. The verb is versatile in the LXX and NT. In the former it refers to animals pulling a yoke (Deut 21:3), persons being pulled out of trouble (2 Sam 22:17), the drawing in of breath (LXX Ps 118:131), and the dragging away of one's enemies (Job 20:28). In the latter it refers to one being drawn to God (John 6:44) or the drawing of a sword (John 18:10). It is used only once more in PJ, when Joseph's son leads (or "pulls") the donkey to Bethlehem (PJ 17:5). De Strycker treats *ἔλκειν* as synonymous with *νέειν* and *κλώθειν*, rendering all three "to spin (*filer*)," yet he acknowledges that this meaning is foreign to Greek lexica.⁵ He notes Hugo Blümner's suggestion that *ἔλκειν* may be employed as a substitute for *κατάγειν*, which sometimes refers to the drawing of thread from a spindle (*Technologie und Terminologie der Gewerbe und Künste bei Griechen und Römern*, 126).

⁶ Talk of the *Moirae* is present in both Jewish and Christian authors of the Common Era. Josephus (ca. 37-100 C.E.) is familiar with the broader concept of one's fate being "spun" (*J.W.* 6.49), and Athenagoras (ca. 133-190 C.E.) and Eusebius (ca. 263-339 C.E.) refer more explicitly to the *Moirae*, the former citing a tradition concerning their "birth" (*Leg.* 18.4), and the latter referring to their traditional roles with respect to the thread they spin (*Praep. ev.* 3.11; 6.8).

⁷ So Burkert, *Greek Religion*, 129, 174.

wretched mortals, that they should live among sorrows” (*Il.* 24.525-26 [Murray and Wyatt, LCL]).

Moreover, at the start of the *Odyssey*, the narrator speaks of Calypso’s failed attempts to keep

Odysseus in captivity: “But when, as the seasons revolved, the year came in which the gods had spun

(ἐπεκλώσαντο) that he should return home to Ithaca” (*Od.* 1.17 [Murray and Dimock, LCL]).⁸ Hesiod is

the first to name the *Moirae* as three separate yet cooperative entities (*Theog.* 901-905). Clotho spins

the thread of life. Lachesis, “the lot caster,” winds it, and Atropos, “the unturnable (ἀτροπεῖν),” clips it,

bringing death. The particular activities of each differ among ancient authors, but they are always

presented as complementary.⁹

The *Moirae* are often portrayed as attending births, where they spin the destiny of the newly born. The image is already present to some extent in Homer. Aeneas speaks of Achilles in the *Iliad*:

“Later he will suffer whatever Fate (Αἶσα) spun (ἐπένησε) for him with her thread at his birth when his

⁸ A subtler example of the relationship between spinning and fate is the character of Penelope, who spins a burial shroud for Odysseus’s elderly father, Laertes. In the wake of Odysseus’s alleged death, suitors plague his house to vie for her hand in marriage. She addresses them thus: “Young men, my suitors, since noble Odysseus is dead, be patient, though eager for my marriage, until I finish this robe—I would not have my spinning (νήματα) come to naught—a shroud for the hero Laertes, against the time when the cruel fate (μοῖρα) of pitiless death shall strike him down” (*Od.* 2.96-100 [Murray and Dimock, LCL]).⁸ The genius of her plan, of course, is that she unravels each night what she spun during the day. Her procrastination can certainly be taken literally: she spins and “unspins” in order to avoid remarriage, and in this sense, her work serves to keep Odysseus’s memory alive and to preserve her marital fidelity. A more nuanced interpretation is that her perpetual spinning and unraveling is in some way keeping both Odysseus and his father alive. Laertes is, after all, quite elderly when Odysseus goes missing, but he is still alive when his son returns two decades later.

⁹ Plato orders the sisters and their respective tasks thus: “There were other three who sat round about at equal intervals, each one on her throne, the Fates (Μοῖρας), daughters of Necessity, clad in white vestments with filleted heads, Lachesis, and Clotho, and Atropos ... and Clotho with the touch of her right hand helped to turn the outer circumference of the spindle, pausing from time to time. Atropos with her left hand in like manner helped to turn the inner circles, and Lachesis alternately with either hand lent a hand to each (*Resp.* 617b-d [Shorey, LCL]).” Additionally: “[Lachesis] sent with each ... the genius that he had chosen, and this divinity led the soul first to Clotho, under her hand and her turning of the spindle to ratify the destiny of his lot and choice; and after contact with her genius again led the soul to the spinning (νήσιν) of Atropos to make the web of its destiny irreversible” (*Resp.* 620d-e [Shorey, LCL]).

mother bore him" (*Il.* 20.127-28 [Murray and Wyatt, LCL]; also *Il.* 24.209-10; *Od.* 7.196-98). They also appear at the births of various gods and goddesses, implying that they exercise authority over *divine* as well as human fate.¹⁰ The question of their power in relation to the gods elicits a variety of answers. Hesiod seems to suggest that Zeus, as the one who gives the *Moirae* their authority in the first place, is simultaneously exempt from it (*Theog.* 901). The matter is stated more firmly by Pausanias in his description of the temple of Zeus at Olympia: "There is an altar, and written on it is *Moiragetes* (Μοιραγέτας). Clearly, this is a title for Zeus, who knows the things of humans, what ever the *Moirae* give and what ever is not destined (πέπρωται) for them" (*Descr.* 5.15.5).¹¹ Translated as "Guide of the *Moirae*," the title shows that their power, while vast, is thought by some to be at least somewhat limited. One theme common to all who address the issue, however, is that *human persons* are never exempt from their grasp: since all must die eventually, all are under the authority of the *Moirae*.¹²

In the works of Lucian of Samosata, the *Moirae* are consistently depicted as either equal to or surpassing the gods in their ability to determine destiny. At one point Lucian, via the philosopher Cyniscus, refers to Zeus hanging from Clotho's spindle like a fish from a fisherman's rod (*Jupp. conf.* 4). He asks Zeus if he is able to unspin what the *Moirae* have decreed, and he responds that he is not (*Jupp. conf.* 7). For Lucian, it would seem as if no person or force is more powerful than the one who spins the thread of destiny, as even the gods are subject to this thread.

¹⁰ So Pindar, *Ol.* 6.39-42; Aeschylus, *Eum.* 334-349; Callimachus, *Hymn. Dian.* 3.22.

¹¹ Also in Pausanias, *Descr.* 8.37.1. Elsewhere he recalls the same title as having been given to Apollo (*Descr.* 10.24.4). See also Alciphron (ca. 170-350 C.E.), *Ep.* 3.37.2.

¹² So Burkert: "For man, the most important and painful boundary is death: this is his limited portion" (*Greek Religion*, 129-30).

But while the power of the *Moirae* in Lucian is vast, it is not absolute, as the Spinners themselves seem impotent to change the destiny that they spin for others; once their thread has been spun, its length determined, none are able to make it longer or shorter. Again the words of Cyniscus are instructive: “Even Atropos would not tolerate it if someone turned back the spindle, undoing the work of Clotho” (*Jupp. conf.* 11). And as Lucian remarks in his *How to Write History*: “I imagine, the things that have been done, not even Clotho can unspin (ἀνακλώσειεν) nor Atropos turn [them] back” (*Hist. Conscr.* 38). Lucian therefore presents the power of the *Moirae* as a sort of paradox: they exercise great authority in their ability to determine fate, but even they are bound by the thread that they spin.

It has been suggested that Mary’s spinning in PJ is meant to echo the tradition of the rending of the veil at the crucifixion. Paul Foster, for example, argues that the story “appears to be told to allow readers the potential to recognize the intertextual link with the rending of the Temple veil in the passion narrative, now armed with the startling piece of knowledge that the mother of Jesus actually helped make the same veil.”¹³ Hock suggests similarly that Mary’s spinning foreshadows “the ironic coincidence that the very veil she had helped to make was split in two at Jesus’ death.”¹⁴ The brevity of their comments suggests that more may be said regarding the significance of this connection.

The Synoptic evangelists employ the rending of the veil episode toward different ends, but each of them links it with the death of Jesus. And scholars agree that regardless of what the tearing of the veil might mean, it is unambiguously a divine act. Reading this image through the lens of Mary as *Moirai*, the veil’s tearing at the moment of Jesus’ death becomes for the reader the moment when his

¹³ Foster, “Protevangeliū,” 578.

¹⁴ Hock, *Infancy Gospels*, 16.

own thread of life, spun for him at his birth, is cut. And as a divine act, the rending of the veil defines the scope of Mary's power; she spins the thread of life, but she does not determine its length, as the work of cutting the thread is ultimately completed by God, in whose hands the fate of Jesus finally rests. Mary's work is thus cooperative, not autonomous.

The Virgin's spinning nuances the Passion Narratives, as it is her handiwork that is destroyed at the crucifixion. And the thread's being severed by God and not Mary establishes the power of the latter as subject to the former. This does not serve to *lessen* her function in the incarnation but rather to *specify* it. She continues to play an integral role in the process of redemption, as her γένοιτό μοι at the annunciation and subsequent spinning in a sense inaugurates the process of the λόγος becoming flesh. That she spins thread for the veil that will be torn points toward the cross, upon which the angel's message to her is fulfilled: "He himself will save (αὐτὸς γὰρ σώσει) his people from their sins" (PJ 11:8; Matt 1:21). Matthew's αὐτὸς σώσει, here appropriated by the author of PJ, illustrates the point: salvation, made possible through Mary's agreement, is ultimately a divine work.¹⁵

¹⁵ So Hagner, *Matthew* 14-28, 18.